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Hotel Online News for the Hospitality Executive

Getting Your Tenured and Tired to Grow and Evolve

By Gary R. Hernbroth, Chief Motivating Officer, May 22, 2013

THERE IS NO CONTINUUM FOR SUCCESS “JUST BECAUSE”

“No thanks, a lot of us have been here a long time.”

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry when the acting sales team leader gave me this answer over the phone to my question about investing in a customized sales and service training program for her team. These few words of hers were both comical and tragic to me at the same time, and they told me all that I needed to know about her organization – and maybe why it was behind in its performance.

Countless hotel leadership teams and executives no doubt face this same dilemma. While it has long been thought that people with many years of experience at their jobs translates to permanent success (especially in sales), telling signs today prove otherwise. To eschew fresh approaches for your longer-term people's skills (or really anyone's), is to take risks with your organization's future. Nowadays, “Evolve or die” is not so much a threat as a prediction.

Previous success by long-timers does not come with a golden ticket into infinity. Alabama Head Football Coach Nick Saban (his teams have won three NCAA titles in the past four seasons) recently spoke on ESPN to this need to evolve and re-prove yourself: “The future and the legacy of a team will be determined by what happens ahead of them, not what happened before. There is no continuum for success. It's an ongoing process, regardless of what we've accomplished in the past.”

In other words, you're only as good as you're *going* to be, not as you *were*.

TEACHING OLD DOGS NEW TRICKS

Doubtless the above-quoted salesperson (who had been at her post for several years in the same hotel) answered me in the manner she did because she doesn't believe that you can necessarily teach old dogs new tricks, or – worse yet – that she and her team already know everything they need to know, and don't need to learn anything new. Thus, she and her team have become “comfortable” – a dangerous word in business. Is your team *comfortable*?

“I just taught my 15 year-old dog to not jump on the couch, so you CAN teach old dogs new tricks,” offers Chris Durso, Major Market Developer with InterContinental Hotels Group. And he adds this warning to sales teams everywhere: “If you're losing market share, you're not done learning.”

Greg Ayers, President/CEO of Discover Kalamazoo (MI) weighs in on continuing the learning in his organization: “While our team possesses a wealth of experience, we are always looking for ways to further develop our talent. One of our strategic priorities is to continuously improve.” Greg backs it up by engaging outside consultants to conduct a sales

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team program evaluation that reviews everything they do to generate new group business for Kalamazoo, “even if we don’t want to hear some of the answers,” he adds.

Like Ayers, smart leaders are about taking preventive measures to insure success. They regularly check under their own organization’s hood or engage others to do it, just to make sure the engine parts are still working efficiently and effectively.

“I’ve been down that road of hearing ‘we don’t need training’ for our seasoned staff or for our salespeople,” says *Wade Bryant, Director of Sales and Marketing for the Embassy Suites-Charleston Area Convention Center* in Charleston, SC. “You could probably classify half of our long-timers in the hospitality industry as insane, if by definition that means, as Steven Covey said, doing the same things over and over again and expecting a different or better result. The fact is long-timers probably need it (training) the most.”

To a hotel/club/facility team leader, it can be a fine line between managing a seasoned, happy team member who uses their great wealth of experience in handling certain (often difficult) situations vs. the “been-there-too-long” team member who carries a burned-out or sluggish attitude around the property or facility, refusing to embrace any new wrinkles. Or, in the case of salespeople, having trouble getting motivated to find new sources of business and thereby not feeding their sales funnel enough. We call them farmers, not hunters.

THE TIMES – AND YOUR GUESTS – ARE CHANGING

To my ears, it’s like hearing nails on a chalkboard when someone with experience says “we’ve always done it that way.” Sure, many hospitality facilities are thriving again in better economic times, at least for some. Why change? Your guests have supported you for years. But be careful – those guests are changing. The expectations and habits of the Baby-Boomers, the Greatest Generation, the Gen-Xers, and the Millennials are all very different. A hotel/facility/resort’s service teams have to be able to evolve their skills in order to stay viable to this changing demographic with changing needs and expectations.

Give some thought as to whether your longer-time employees have their habits so ingrained that they cannot change or be flexible to this new wave of guests. If so, it’s time for you to step in and take training (or re-training) by the nose. It won’t happen by osmosis.

“I’m often encountering life’s plodders, who do just enough not to be fired,” remarks *Phil Anderson*, hospitality consultant and a veteran of the hospitality and resort business for over 20 years as both a general manager and a sales/marketing executive. “It often seems like the theme is ‘sustained mediocrity’ in some places that I go. And the sad thing is it’s tolerated by other plodders. When you inherit a veteran or tenured staff to manage, whether it’s in operations or sales, it can often mean trouble.”

“A sense of entitlement can arise with employees who have been in one place 5, 10, 15 years or more,” offers *James Horner, Assistant Facilities and Public Events Director for the City of Fort Worth*, including the Fort Worth Convention Center and Will Rogers Memorial Center. “They come to think ‘I’ve done it all.’ Certainly, they still have pride, but they don’t want to work that hard anymore. They start to work in silos. Certainly, investing in a fresh approach can open their eyes. We’ve been working on tearing down those silos, and now the ‘quackers,’ as we call them, are

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in the very small minority. That wasn't always the case. Both tired attitudes and wonderful enthusiasm are contagious, and we prefer the latter. After all, either way it rubs off on your customers."

Of course, not all long-term employees are toxic. There are those that carry great attitudes, the eagerness to grow, and the abilities to teach. They can also be highly valuable in the process of re-invigoration, working in concert with the training and getting other team members to get traction with the new direction. I call those people *ENABLERS*.

On the other side of the coin, however, are the *INHIBITORS*, those who need a kick in the pants and a make-over of their routines, before you lose your market share. They may have run out of gas working their network for new business or no longer seek to update their talents, and thus they become liabilities. Can your organization afford that?

CHANGE IS INEVITABLE, GROWTH IS OPTIONAL

Sure, that's a well-known proverb. But can anyone argue that it's not true? Your long-timers need to evolve their skills to stay relevant, *because nothing else in our world or this business is standing still*. They need to get on this bus! And please don't ask your team "Do you think we need training?" That's YOUR call. They'll likely come up with a dozen excuses. The long-timers probably like life as it is, and training means stretching and stretching means work, so the easy answer becomes "No." Worse yet, some bean-counters may answer with "Can we afford it?" Well, can you afford *not to*?

A leading veteran of the CVB side of the business concurs. "If you and your team don't take the time to reinvent your approach to business, you will lose, plain and simple," says *Doug Small, President/CEO of Experience Grand Rapids (MI)*. "While others have decreased their budgets for professional development, we have gone the other way. We actually set goals for enhancing the skill set of our employees in a variety of disciplines to help them stay ahead of an ever-changing marketplace." As a believer in the approach, Small even takes it beyond his own team: "We 'fund' education for our member hotels, too, as it's a collaborative approach to increasing revenues for all."

Years ago, it was true that the big ate the small. Then it became the quick that ate the slow. Nowadays, add into the mix that it's the great that eats the just good enough, and the energetic that eats the tired. Which term best fits your organization?

INVESTING IN YOUR TEAM'S GROWTH: CONSTANCY & CONSISTENCY, NOT DUCKS QUACKING

Consider these points when deciding whether or not to invest in professional, sustained, and supported learning to help evolve the skills of your tenured teams:

** If you're not getting better, you're getting worse. It's that simple. This in itself can keep hospitality managers up at night.*

** Fund the project as an investment, not an expense. You are working with improving people's minds and invigorating their behaviors, not just re-surfacing your pool area or buying new linens. If you think learning is expensive, try ignorance.*

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** Help overcome the “fear factor.” Many people fear change, and being trained or re-trained represents change. Get your best long-timers around the reasons for a program – Illustrate “what’s in it for them?”, and they are more likely to support the training initiative to other long-time team members. This will cut down on the grumbling.*

** Chew the elephant in small bites. Assess which specific areas that you and your guests/planners feel need the greatest attention, and start your training there.*

** Support the learning efforts visibly, actively, and often. Nothing kills a training program faster than when upper management doesn’t support the workshops, or doesn’t get involved in the follow-up. You don’t want the staff to get the feeling that upper management is “above all of this.” After all, you’re not.*

** As a next step, determine roles, goals, responsibilities, and accountabilities in your program. Get all hands on deck, pointed to the same beachhead. Bring in some help. Have a plan, don’t just scatter a few hours here and there for certain parts of your facility. Get a unified effort going across all fronts. After all, your work family should not operate in a bunch of independent silos.*

** Make your training programs just that – programs – that are sustainable. No one-offs that someone in HR checks off their list as a to-do for a couple of hours. CONSTANCY & CONSISTENCY will help insure long-term success. There is no magic “pixie dust” that will address your needs totally in one session.*

So, the choice is yours — Tenured and tired, or growing and evolving? Take a look under your hood and keep your long-time team members in forward motion with preventative maintenance and frequent tune-ups. Don’t let them become obsolete or irrelevant. Your guests/planners will thank you with their return business and referrals. And the increased positive social media reviews won’t hurt your bottom line, either.

Contact Gary Hernbroth for customized training, speaking, and coaching opportunities: gary@trainingforwinners.com (mailto:gary@trainingforwinners.com) website: [trainingforwinners.com](http://www.trainingforwinners.com) (<http://www.trainingforwinners.com/>). Phone 925-736-9392

Contact: Gary Hernbroth gary@trainingforwinners.com (mailto:gary@trainingforwinners.com) website: [trainingforwinners.com](http://www.trainingforwinners.com) (http://www.trainingforwinners.com) Phone 925-736-9392

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